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Students from Highland Park High School and Wilmette-based Loyola Academy are helping bring a little cheer to the troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan this holiday season.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-10th, joined students from Loyola Academy and Highland Park High School at the academy last week in Wilmette in support of the student efforts to help the troops overseas.

Loyola Academy students donated more than 300 stockings filled with candy and other holiday goodies to Operation Support Our Troops Illinois, a non-profit volunteer organization, which sends care packages to the troops serving in Iraq in Afghanistan.

Highland Park High School students also have been assisting Operation Support Our Troops by packing boxes filled with donated items, such as canned boxes, peanut butter, personal items, DVDs and compact discs.

"This is the first year we've had such an overwhelming response from high school students," Kirk said. "I was very proud of the students and the overall response."

Living so close to Fort Sheridan and the Great Lakes Naval Station, many Highland Park students have family members or know people serving in the military.

"Certainly, we know many kids in our school that have a parent or a brother or sister who are serving overseas in the military," said Mitchell Kanter, 17, a senior at Highland Park High School, who is helping coordinate the school's efforts along with senior Daniel White, 18.

Kanter, White and other students have been helping pack care packages that will be sent to the

troops. They also are holding small fund-raising events in the school and have placed donation boxes at selected restaurants and businesses in the community to raise money for the cause.

"I feel the troops always do so much for us and they're risking their lives every day and it's our duty to help them out in any way we can," said White. "This is just our little effort to make their experience over there a little better."

For the fourth year, the student council at Loyola Academy, in conjunction with Operation Support Our Troops Illinois, collected leftover candy and other items throughout November to send to soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Since Halloween, students filled more than 300 stockings with candy and five boxes "heavier than any one person could lift," said Charlie Heintz, dean of student services at Loyola Academy.

Lt. John Vosnos, a serviceman from the 75th Army Division at Fort Sheridan in Highland Park, was deployed to Iraq in 2005 and 2006 and said that the care packages are important in boosting morale of the troops.

"In an all-volunteer army it's absolutely crucial to know American people support you," said Vosnos of Vernon Hills. "There are a lot of tough days over there, and coming back to (these) packages on your bunk contributes to mission accomplishment as well as morale."

Deb Rickert, president of Operation Support Our Troops Illinois, noted that because of shipping delays, it can take weeks for packages to get to troops. Heintz said this factored into starting collection after Halloween, so packages would arrive overseas in time for the holidays.

Rickert's non-profit organization collects and ships items and letters to American troops serving in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"Operation Support our Troops has sent more than 5,000 boxes to the men and women serving in Iraq this year alone, and more than 15,000 boxes since 2003," said Kirk.

Kirk said while most of the holiday packages have already been sent to the troops, his district office continues to accept items. He said items like peanut butter, beef jerky, canned fruit and handy wipes are often in short supply for the troops who are in the field and are not stationed near a major military base. Individuals interested in donating goods can drop them off at Kirk's Northbrook office at 707 Skokie Blvd., Suite 350.

For more information on how to donate, visit the Operation Support Our Troops Illinois Web site at <http://www.osotil.org/>.

Staff intern Sarah Arkin contributed to this story